

In the early part of January, 1945, the enemy made a strong effort to re-establish himself on the west bank of the Rhine River in the area just north of Strasbourg by pushing a sizable force across the Rhine into this area. One of the units engaged in containing him in the bridgeheads that he had secured was the 311th Infantry Regiment of the 79th Infantry Division.

At the beginning of January, the 311th Infantry held positions in the Maginot Line northeast of Haguenau. The regiment carried out the following operation without the 1st Battalion since that battalion was attached on 1 January to the 45th Division and had left the area. Early on the morning of 5 January the regiment was relieved from its line positions by the 242nd Regiment and ordered into reserve. Relief was completed by 0700. The 2nd Battalion was moved to Schwabwiller and the 3rd Battalion to Oberbetschdorf.

However, at 1210, 5 January, the battalions were alerted for movement to the vicinity of Gernsheim-Herrlisheim-Offendorf to engage the enemy who had occupied these towns. The route of approach was specified as through Bischwiller. One platoon of Tank Destroyers from Company "B", 813th Tank Destroyer Battalion, was attached to the regiment at 1330 and at 1420 the move was started to Bischwiller along the route marked by the I and R platoon.

Arriving at Bischwiller at 1340, the two battalions went into positions as follows: the 2nd Battalion occupied the eastern and north-eastern outskirts of the city; the 3rd Battalion the southern and south-western outskirts. An outpost line was set up 500-1000 yards ahead. For the night the mission of the unit was to protect Bischwiller and prepare to launch an attack on Rohrwiller the following morning.

Enemy activity during the night 5-6 January was light. The 3rd Battalion reported some movement to its front, however, and eight or nine rounds of artillery fire fell on Bischwiller. Two patrols sent out by the 2nd Battalion to the vicinity of Rohrwiller encountered no enemy resistance (as had the I and R platoon on an earlier reconnaissance) but noted enemy movement and heard talking in the town.

On the morning of 6 January the 2nd Battalion proceeded on the first step of the regiment's assigned mission; the taking of Rohrwiller. For this operation a platoon of tanks (5) from Company "B", 47th Tank Battalion, was attached. Jumping off at 0630 and encountering ~~heavy~~ ^{light} resistance, ^{due to the speed} by of the 1030 the 2nd Battalion, in the lead, ^{capturing some 50 prisoners} had occupied Rohrwiller with its Companies "E" and "F" ("H" Company in support) while Company "G" combed the Bois de Drusenheim to the east of the town. At about 1400 Company "G", mounted on tanks, led the battalion into Drusenheim, coming into the north-western part of the town. Light small arms resistance was encountered and overcome.

In the meantime, the 3rd Battalion had moved off at 1300 from Bischwiller and had reached Rohrwiller. The plan was that the 2nd Battalion would clear the route through Drusenheim, then turn south and take Herrlisheim and that the 3rd Battalion would then go through Herrlisheim and take Offendorf. The mission of the 3rd Battalion then, for the moment, was to wait in Rohrwiller until the 2nd Battalion moved into Herrlisheim.

The 2nd Battalion, having overcome the light small arms resistance mentioned above, made contact with elements of Company "A", 232nd Infantry, which were in the northern edge of town.

Company "G" had entered the town with two tanks and had moved to the south-east through town, across the bridge over the Moder River (159-180)

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into the southern part of Drusenheim. "F" Company, which had followed "G" Company from Rohrwiller into Drusenheim on foot, was prevented from crossing the bridge over the Moder River into the southern part of Drusenheim at once by enemy artillery fire which was falling into the area. When the artillery fire ceased, the bridge was still serviceable and Company "F" crossed the bridge to join Company "G" which by this time had practically cleared the southern part of town of the disorganized resistance which it had found there. Three more tanks were brought over; the last one to cross broke down the bridge.

Although the unserviceability of the bridge made further motorized reinforcements impossible (the river having been determined to be unfordable at this point), it was decided that the two companies of the 2nd Battalion which had already crossed, "F" and "G", should push forward on the way to Herrlisheim. Company "E", at this time, was proceeding on foot east from Rohrwiller toward Drusenheim. "H" Company had moved with the rifle companies as they advanced on Drusenheim. Positions were taken up in and around Drusenheim in order to be prepared to render support to the rifle companies.

As the movement out of Drusenheim started, Company "F" was the leading element. With the five tanks, the company jumped off at 1630. The 1st and 3rd platoons led; the 2nd came in the rear as a reserve. As "F" company proceeded southwest out of Drusenheim between the Moder River and the highway, one platoon of Company "G" extended itself along the road flanker following the advance of Company "F". The rest of Company "G", still in the southern part of Drusenheim, continued clearing up the town and preparing to follow Company "F". Light artillery fire, 20 MM and 40 MM, was falling on the town and on Company "F" as it moved out.

The first objective of Company "F" was a factory building located on the bank of the Moder River at (149-172). In its advance "F" Company met isolated resistance groups and it was nearly dark by the time it arrived at the factory. The factory was found to contain an enemy strong point and to be protected by booby traps and prepared charges. The enemy in the factory was attacked by tank fire and grenades; after a short struggle the factory was in the hands of Company "F". In its advance to and taking of the factory "F" Company had captured two officers and 51 enlisted Germans.

Darkness having come and enemy resistance along the road to Herrlisheim being a certainty, it was decided to proceed no further that night. Accordingly, the 2nd Battalion, less "F" Company, established itself for the night in and around Drusenheim. Company "F" disposed itself along the railroad embankment in the south-eastern part of the Bois de Drusenheim while Company "F" held its positions in and around the factory and "G" remained in the southern part of Drusenheim. "H" Company also remained in its positions in the Drusenheim area. The 3rd Battalion remained in Rohrwiler and outposted the western portion of the Bois de Drusenheim. During the evening the bridge at Drusenheim, linking up the north and south portions of town, was repaired.

The night 6-7 January was marked by occasional artillery and mortar fire which fell on both the 2nd and 3rd Battalion positions. At daybreak however, enemy reaction was more positive. Preceding their attack with an artillery barrage lasting one hour and ten minutes, the enemy struck at the 2nd Battalion in its extended positions from Drusenheim to the factory southwest of Drusenheim. The terrain in this Rhine valley section was very well suited to the enemy for his attack. South-west of Drusenheim, to the factory and beyond, all the way to Herrlisheim, there were small clumps of trees and bushes which afforded cover and concealment for advancing infantry. Then there was the

highway and the railroad running from Herrlisheim to Drusenheim (see map #1) both of which were built on high embankments. These embankments gave excellent protection to infantry and automatic weapon personnel. South-east, east and to the north-east of Drusenheim, the heavily wooded area on the western banks of the Rhine thinned out in what might be termed an open woods, but the few scattered ^{Trees} ~~scattered~~ and the undergrowth around them furnished all the cover and concealment that an attacking enemy needed to work his way into Drusenheim unobserved, especially under cover of darkness. Then, too, throughout the entire area there were small ditches and other breaks in the flat surface, well suited to the movement of infantry. The enemy attack on the morning of 7 January came from the southwest, generally from the direction of Herrlisheim in the strength of an estimated one battalion of infantry supported by tanks. The embankment of the highway running southwest from Drusenheim and the railway embankment were used by him for cover.

The attack first fell on Company "F" in its factory position and came from the southwest across the railway embankment. By means of small arms, automatic weapons, and tank fire, Company "F" broke up this attack, losing two of its tanks to ~~A.M.~~ fire. The enemy withdrew to the south and, under the protection of the highway embankment, swung around to the east. He then moved in a north-easterly direction towards Drusenheim and Company "G" located there.

At this time the 3rd Battalion in Rehwiller, in order to assist the 2nd Battalion, sent Company "I" through the western edge of the Bois de Drusenheim to the Southern edge of the woods; there to cross the river and then move to the northeast, staying north of the Herrlisheim-Drusenheim highway and attacking the flank of the enemy engaging "G" Company in southeastern Drusenheim. However, when the river was reached it was learned that it could not be crossed.

At this point the river is approximately 65 feet wide, some 6 or 7 feet deep

and has a swift current.

When it became clear that the main effort was to be directed against the south-eastern part of Drusenheim, "E" Company was ordered to move from its position in the eastern part of the Bois de Drusenheim into Drusenheim and "F" Company was ordered to withdraw to Drusenheim along the route by which it moved into the factory. But by this time the enemy had covered by automatic weapons and tanks (well defiladed by the highway embankment) the area between the road and the river. So it was decided that "F" Company should withdraw directly north from the factory, crossing the river by wading. An outpost was left in the factory. "F" Company crossed the stream and set up positions in the south-eastern edge of the Bois de Drusenheim (see overlay B). In as much as the three remaining tanks could not ford the river, it was decided that they should make an attempt to break out to Drusenheim along the south bank of the river; of these tanks one became stuck on the river bank, the other two reached Drusenheim but were knocked out there before they could cross the bridge.

Company "G" then withdrew to the north across the bridge and joined "E" Company in the main part of Drusenheim. By dark, the companies of the battalion were in the position shown on overlay B which, with minor changes, were the positions occupied during the next twelve days. The day's action, in addition to an undetermined number of personnel casualties, cost the enemy six tanks. In the case of the 3rd Battalion in Rohrwiller, Companies "L" and "K" remained in the town; Company "I" had built up along the south-western edge of the Bois de Drusenheim.

With the units in positions as described, further operations by the 314th Infantry (less 1st Battalion) to counteract the enemy activities were planned. Inasmuch as the river in front of the 2nd Battalion's positions made an attack

against the enemy a very difficult operation, the plans were made for an attack to come from the 3rd Battalion at Rohrwiller. The 3rd Battalion was to jump off from its positions around Rohrwiller on the next morning ("I" and "K" Companies in the assault), cross the river, keeping north of the highway, press to the northeast and attack from the flank of the enemy facing the 2nd Battalion in Drusenheim. At the same time the light bridge across the Moder River at Rohrwiller was to be held and a bridge-head was to be established on the southern bank of the Zorn River on the Rohrwiller-Herrlisheim road. When a suitable bridge was completed at this river crossing, it was intended that elements of the 12 Armored Division, proceeding south ^{out} of Rohrwiller, would launch an attack on Herrlisheim.

Enemy activity on the night of 7-8 January was limited to patrolling. Considerable movement was heard south of the 3rd Battalion's positions. Observers reported hearing numerous track-laying vehicles to their front and judged that at least six tanks were in front of "I" Company's positions and the same number near the factory where Company "F" had made its stand on the morning of 7 January.

On the morning of 8 January at 1000 the 3rd Battalion set out on the assigned mission. Such heavy artillery, mortar and small arms fire was encountered that "K" Company could not advance more than a short distance out of Rohrwiller and "I" Company could not reach its river crossing. This artillery fire was followed by enemy counterattacks from Herrlisheim towards Rohrwiller. During the rest of the day, Companies "I" and "K" were engaged in preventing the enemy from crossing the river. Southeast of Rohrwiller Company "L", however, having been assigned the mission of establishing the

bridgehead across the Zorn River, pushed forward aggressively. Elements of "L" Company crossed the Zorn River by wading and covered their bridgehead from the water-works buildings (130-168). "K" Company remained in the vicinity of Rohrwiller, covering with fire "L" Company's operations and "I" Company remained in the south-western edge of the Bois de Drusenheim. The activities of the regiment from this time on until its withdrawal on 20 January consisted, generally, of holding what it had taken and of being to engage on further offensive action in conjunction with other units. Enemy pressure around the 2nd and 3rd Battalion positions was constantly felt. Artiller exchanges were frequent and patrolling was kept up by both sides. There was no essential changes in positions of the battalions, although Company "I"'s position in the Bois de Drusenheim was taken over by Company "K" on the 12 January while the former drew back to outpost Rohrwiller.

On the morning of 9 January, an enemy force struck at the bridgehead on the Zorn River held by Company "L"; although the bridgehead guard was forced back across the river temporarily, "L" Company regained its positions on the south side of the river, wading across again after an hour and a half of fighting. In the late afternoon of that day a heavy vehicle bridge was completed across the river at this point. During the next few days the infiltration tactics pursued by the enemy around the bridgehead were met and overcome.

On the 15 January, the elements of Company "A", 232nd Infantry, were withdrawn from their positions in the northern section of the town of Drusenheim. To fill the gap left by their going, the 1st platoon of Company "F" was withdrawn from the Bois de Drusenheim and disposed north of the

railroad track within the town (see overlay B). Contact with friendly forces to the north was maintained by a road patrol of the 2nd Battalion which worked in conjunction with a similar patrol of Company "K", 232nd Infantry, to the north. The regimental I and R platoon took over this patrol on 17 January.

An attack by a combat command of the 12th Armored Division was made on 16 January. This attack jumped off from Rohrwiller at 0200 and using the bridges south of the town held by the 3rd Battalion, 314th Infantry, struck south toward Herrlisheim. But 68 MM fire from the northern edge of Herrlisheim and from behind the railroad embankment stopped the attack; by noon the combat command had withdrawn to Rohrwiller, having lost twelve tanks. Company "L", however, continued to hold its bridgeheads lest they be needed for subsequent operations. The rest of the regiment was unaffected at this time. (The positions indicated on overlay B were held by the 2nd and 3rd Battalions).

Artillery fire was heavy during the early morning hours of 19 January with the enemy laying a concentrated fire on Rohrwiller beginning at 0115. After that the morning was fairly quiet. However, an enemy massing of strength around Drusenheim became apparent (see comment above on terrain around Drusenheim). At 1100 the 2nd Battalion reported a build-up south of the town. At the same

time a build-up was noted in the area northeast of the 1st platoon of "F" Company in the zone where elements of the 232nd Inf. had withdrawn under heavy enemy pressure. This withdrawal uncovered and exposed the town of Drusenheim to hostile attack from three directions. Throughout the day this platoon was subjected to small arms fire from enemy infantry and occasional HE tank fire. The enemy was using the woods southwest of Dengolsheim to cover concentrations to the north.

Realizing the threat to the battalion imposed by this force building to the northeast and acting upon advice from the regimental headquarters, Lt. Colonel Huff, C.O. of the 2nd Battalion, concentrated as much of his automatic fire power as was consistent with all-around safety in the north-eastern

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At dusk the enemy began to lay heavy fire on the town; artillery and mortar. Intense automatic weapons fire came from the south of the town. It is believed that the purpose of this fire from the south was primarily diversionary, for the initial assault on the town came from the northeast. The night of January 19-20, the enemy attack struck with full force.

Under the cover of the noise resulting from the firing from the south and using infiltration tactics, the enemy assault teams worked down the railway embankment leading south from Sessenheim into the outskirts of Drusenheim. Bazooka teams were in the lead. Following the bazooka teams were at least five tanks and infantry estimated in the strength of at least two companies. First the machine guns and T.D.'s covering the northeast entrance to the town were knocked out by the bazookas, then the enemy pushed along the railroad track to the station. The tanks, accompanied by infantry, moved into town. They immediately spread out through the town with the obvious plan of cutting off the 2nd Battalion from the north. Extreme rapidity on the part of the enemy characterized this action. The weapons defending the northeast corner of the town were heard to fire only a few rounds before being silenced. Minutes later the enemy armor was in the town. The mortar positions of Company "H" in the center of the town and its machine gun positions throughout the town were surrounded and overrun.

Almost simultaneous with the action in the north of the town, the enemy moved forward towards Drusenheim from the south and southeast, while in the southwest he started to thrust across the Moder River west of the factory area into the Bois de Drusenheim. Upon working his way into the woods, the enemy forces began to turn to the west towards "K" Company's positions and to the east towards the position occupied by "F" Company (less one platoon) (see overlay C). In the town, he attacked the positions of Company "G" from the

east, crossing the Moder River above the bridge site in southern Drusenheim under the cover of darkness and of a high wall just on the north bank of the river (see overlay C). Grenades and small arms were used to isolate into small groups the personnel of Company "G". Company "E", being hit from the southwest by enemy forces that had worked their way around Drusenheim, engaged the enemy in an intense fire fight and appeared to be holding firm. Upon determining the nature of the attack, the CO of the 2nd Battalion ordered Company "F" (less one platoon) to move from the Bois de Drusenheim to the northern part of Drusenheim and with the 1st platoon to establish a strongpoint on the northwest corner of the town, along the road leading to Rohrwiller. Outposts were to be left in the old platoon positions in the woods. A strong point was established (vicinity 153-184) as directed.

The enemy continued cutting up the town. His first objective was the Battalion Command Post. This was reported surrounded at 1815, shortly after the attack started. Tanks roamed the town firing their guns into cellars. Parties engaged in cutting telephone wires, while tank-supported infantry fell upon the rear of "E" and "G" companies. The strongpoint of Company "F" was not heavily besieged although two tanks took up positions on a side street covering the main leading into the town from the north.

Further to the west of the Bois de Drusenheim the enemy spearhead was making progress. By 1920 enemy troops had pushed between "K" Company in the western part of the woods and Company "F"'s outposts in the eastern section. "F" Company had completed its withdrawal to the strongpoint in Drusenheim. "K" Company pulled back closer to Rohrwiller with its left flank across the Rohrwiller-Drusenheim road. A company of 11th Infantry, which was operating to the north of Rohrwiller, was sent down to make contact with Company "K" and close the gap caused by the isolating of the 2nd Battalion. This company failed to make contact and the gap was never closed prior to the general withdrawal to the Moder River line.

With the CP surrounded and wires cut, communication between the 2nd Battalion and the regimental CP was limited to radio. When the battalion reported the extent of the enemy occupation at 2010, orders were issued that an attempt should be made to break out to the northwest. But control by the enemy had gone too far; he had isolated our forces into small groups preventing their organizing in sufficient strength to break out through the strongpoint of Company "F". This situation was reported by the 2nd Battalion at 2230; that a break-through was impossible. But further attempts at organizing for a break were continued until about 0030. At about this time Company "F" was ordered by the CO of the 2nd Battalion to leave its strongpoint and withdraw before enemy forces completed encircling it, too. At 0150, the last communication from the 2nd Battalion was received to the effect that a breakout was impossible. From that time on the radio transmitter at the 2nd Battalion failed to function because of lack of power. At about 0430 personnel of the surrounded CP were given permission to try to escape; one man who managed successfully to escape said that the last he saw of the battalion staff was their being lined up in street before the CP by their captors.

On receipt of the order to withdraw, Company "F" left its strongpoint and, under cover of snow squall, worked its way across the open field to the woods northeast of the position that they had held, thence to Bischwiller. ^{small groups of E, G, Bn. Hq. and the I and R pltn.} Four officers and eighty-six enlisted men of Company "F" had returned that morning but the rest of the battalion personnel were unaccounted for, missing in action. Also missing were the members of ^{one squad of} the regimental I and R platoon whose CP had been in a house near the railroad station, the personnel of a platoon of the regimental A.T. Company which had been posted in the town, and the crews of the attached tank destroyers.

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Various plans for the relief and reinforcement of the 2nd Battalion were under consideration at regimental headquarters but had to be discarded on account of darkness, of the obvious strength of the enemy and the disposition of friendly forces to the north and south. But at 1115, 20 January, as part of a general withdrawal to the Moder River line, orders were received that the regiment (less one battalion) should prepare to move west to the vicinity of Bischwiller to set up a defensive position.

The above plan was carried out later that day. Here the 1st Battalion returned to regimental control. Closing in at 0015, January 21, the 314th Infantry set up a defensive position in the vicinity of Bischwiller, generally along the Moder River, the 1st Battalion on the left, the 3rd Battalion on the right.

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The material on which the account of the 311th Infantry Regiment's action at Drusenheim in January, 1945 is based was obtained during the period 24 January - 3 February, 1945.

At this time the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the regiment and Company "F" were holding under great pressure a sector just southeast of Haguenau. The 2nd Battalion was being re-constituted in the vicinity of Hochstett, France. Because of the critical tactical situation, interviews with key personnel were difficult and sometimes impossible to obtain. However, the regimental staff of Colonel Warren A. Robinson, while pointing out the undesirability of conducting interviews with line personnel, were most cooperative. The Executive Officer and the S-3 devoted a great deal of time to the undersigned and made available such personnel as could be spared - these including the company commander and several enlisted men of Company "F" and also some enlisted men from the 2nd Battalion Headquarters Company who had escaped from Drusenheim as the Command Post was being overrun.

Warren E. Waters

WARREN E. WATERS
Capt., CAC

CL-514

Unit:

2nd and 3rd Battalion, 314th Infantry Regiment, 79th Division

Action:

The loss of the 2nd Battalion at Drusenheim, France.

Sources:

Interviews with regimental staff and enlisted personnel.

Places and Dates of interviews:

Hochstett, France 24 - 29 January

Maps:

France 1:25,000 Drusenheim 39 - 15.

Journals:

✓ Regimental Journal, 314th Infantry, Jan. 1945.